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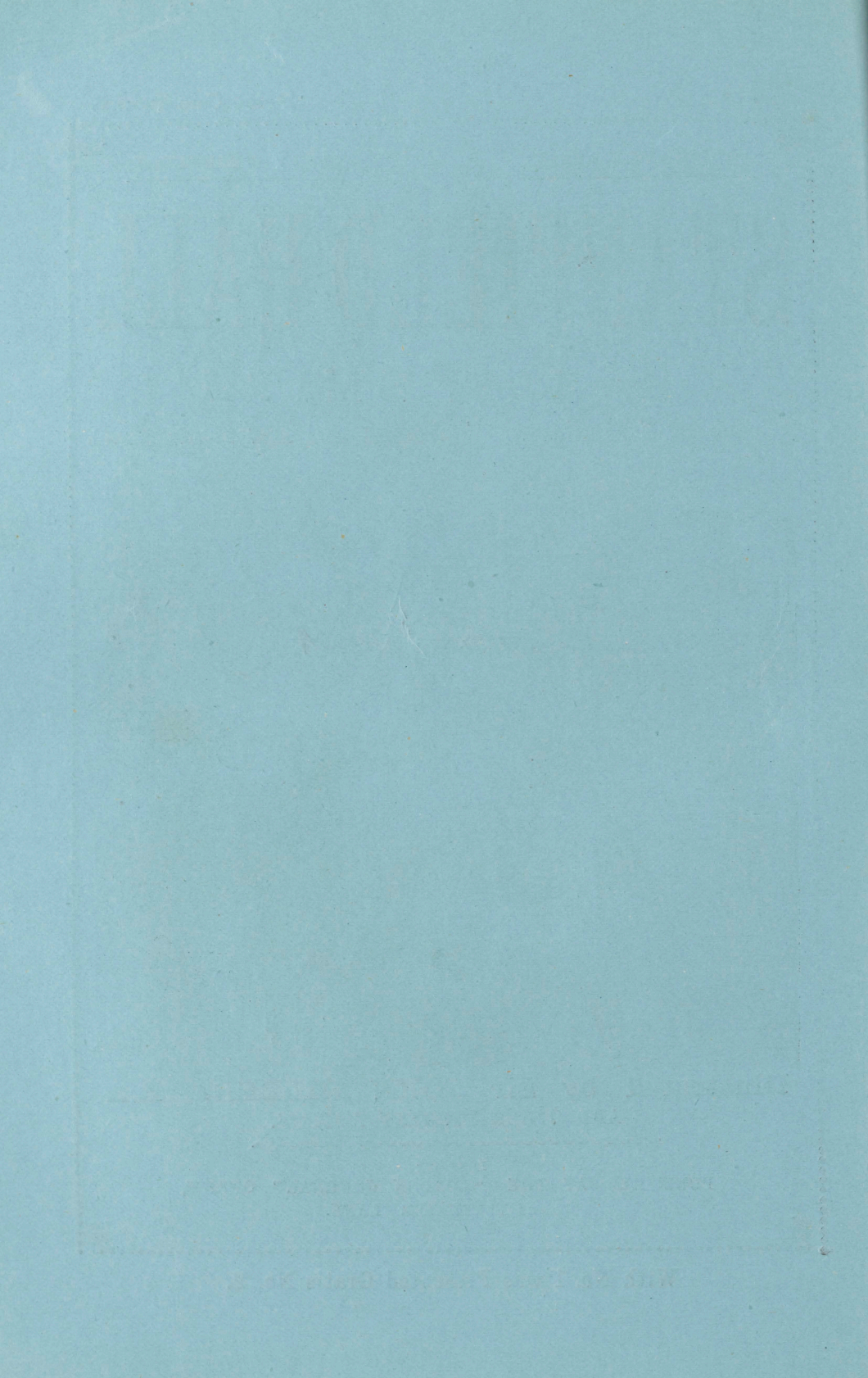
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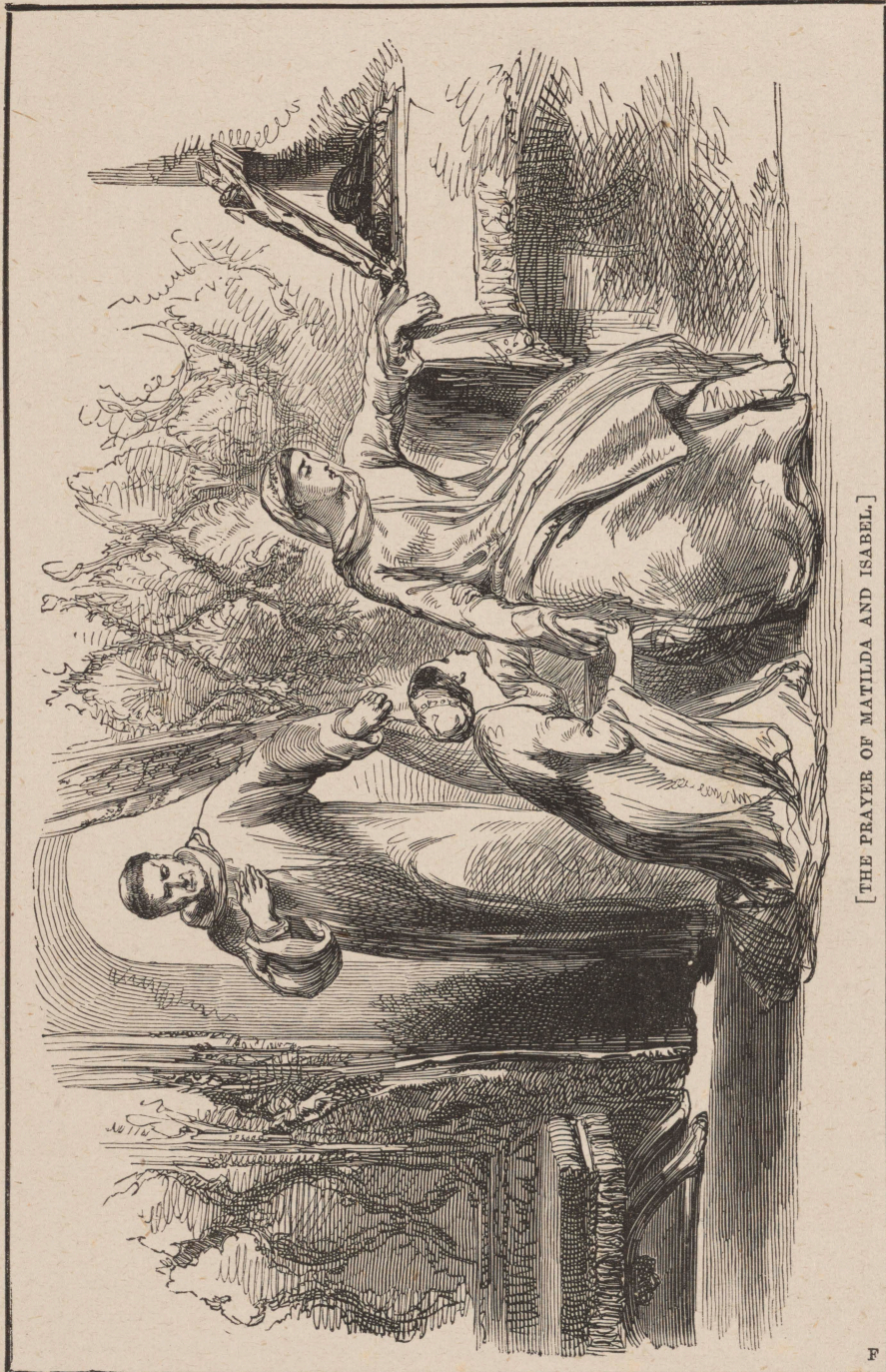


Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.
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[THE PRAYER OF MATILDA AND ISABEL.]

see if he was observed, and springing to his feet, "if thou art mortal, this will reach thee."

He drew the concealed weapon from his cloak, and raised his impious hand to strike; but ere it could descend, the sandalled foot of the monk had crushed the phial beneath it, and the confessional was instantaneously filled by a thin, subtle vapour, whose effects were electrical. The weapon of the assassin fell, as if struck by lightning, to the ground, while he himself stood nerveless as a new-born infant before his judge and his accuser.

"This is the completion of thy crimes," said Oswald, after a pause; "thy dark career is run."

A party of monks, summoned by his voice, soon filled the chapel; to them he recounted the attempt upon his life, and pointed to the criminal, whose person was instantly secured, for he made no resistance—his mind, like his body, seemed to have been stricken by palsy, so extraordinary was the effect produced upon him by the means through which the priest had disarmed him—means perfectly comprehended by the scientific of the present day, but which to Ernulf's superstitious mind seemed like the direct interposition of Providence.

CHAPTER V.

IN consideration of the nobility of Ulrick's birth, the confession of which was so strangely wrung from his accuser, he was not retained in the common dungeons of the castle—a series of subterranean cells which extended far below the level of the moat—but in the loftiest apartment of Bigod's tower, the extreme height of which rendered all escape by external means impossible. The interior was equally well guarded; for the only staircase which conducted to it was situated in the guard chamber, through which all who either ascended or descended were obliged to pass, and where a faithful troop of men-at-arms, who had grown grey in the service of the murdered earl, kept constant watch.

The high courage and sense of innocence which had sustained our hero in the presence of Herman and the assembled nobles gave way as the last ponderous bolt was drawn upon him by his retiring gaolers. The sound fell upon his ear like earth cast upon a coffin, and mentally he saw written over his prison door the tremendous inscription which Dante read upon the gates of Hell:

"LASCIA TE ESPERANZA."

"Where," he exclaimed, "are now the joyous visions of my youth, my thirst of honour—of a life of usefulness, of trustful

confidence, and hopeful love? Fled for ever. I have dreamt the dream which idiots dream, but, waking, found my reason. Fool!" he added bitterly, "even for one moment to suppose this world contained aught of love or happiness for thee!"

In this gloomy mood he continued to pace the floor of his prison, his heart at times cheered by the knowledge of his innocence, and the assurance that his birth was noble. Father Oswald, it was plain, possessed some key to the mystery of his fate; and like a chained lion, Ulrick fretted his soul against the bars of his dungeon. How often did he pray but for one hour of freedom to rend the veil which obscured his destiny, and which he never felt so palpably before! At times fancy would represent him as the victor in the coming fight, his honour cleared, his innocence established; or seated in some old ancestral hall, Matilda by his side, and offspring who resembled her around him;—then for a moment he forgot his fate, the fearful accusation which hung over him, and felt a taste of joy.

The walls of Ulrick's prison were formed of huge blocks of stone, which rose to the height of about twelve feet, where they joined the rude groining of the arch, the key-stone of which was the quaintly sculptured head of some Saxon king, whose staring eyes, like those of the evil genius of the place, seemed to mock the prisoner; the window, narrow and strongly barred, was situated in a deep recess cut in the wall, the massive thickness of which might have withstood even the artillery of the present day. In a corresponding recess in the opposite side of the room was a singular piece of sculpture representing a crucifixion, in which the victim was a boy about twelve years of age. According to a tradition well known in Norwich, a Christian youth had been crucified by the Jews on Good Friday, in mockery of the Saviour. On the miraculous discovery of his body, he was canonised, and his name still appears in the Roman calendar under the name of St. William in the Wood. Similar memorials of the legend were once extremely common in the neighbourhood, and may still be found in some of the old churches and conventual remains, not only in Norfolk, but its adjoining counties.

The prisoner's reflections were interrupted by the entrance of Odo's squire, who, followed by the ordinary keepers of the tower, brought Ulrick his repast, the first he had tasted for four-and-twenty hours. To all his eager questions and entreaties they maintained a dogged silence; each one felt that he was a spy on the other; and prudence, if not fidelity, fettered their tongue.

Exhausted as the captive was, he merely broke a morsel of bread, and took a draught of the flask of wine which they had left him, and then resumed his walk, again to indulge in the reveries of his excited imagination; in dreams of hope, perhaps never to be realised; or in visions of despair, yet more gloomy than his destiny. For more than an hour he had continued to pace his prison floor;

his brow gradually becoming more and more flushed, and the fire of fever burning in his cheek and haggard eye. He could no longer conceal from himself that he was ill, perhaps dying; the recollection of the wine which he had drunk flashed upon him, and fearfully explained the mystery.

"I am poisoned!" he exclaimed. "Oh, cruel treachery! My name will descend polluted to the grave! Matilda's curse, perchance, will rest upon it. I'll not die, like the wolf, inglorious in his lair without one effort. Help!" he shrieked, at the same time beating with his hands and feet frantically against the door; "treachery! murder!"

Long did the wretched Ulrick continue to awake the echoes of his prison-tower. It was evident that he was doomed to die alone, poisoned—treacherously and cowardly poisoned, by the man who feared to meet his victim in honourable fight.

"I'll strive no more," sighed the exhausted youth, "with a destiny so wretched—lost, as mine; but, since my hour is come, will meet it like a Christian and a man; and with a sigh to my love, but without one regret for earth, resign my soul to the keeping of the saints."

Unable longer to retain his feet, Ulrick threw himself upon his rude couch; and although his mind would wander in his prayer, yet still he prayed, until his senses were absorbed in sleep—a sleep his enemy had doomed to be eternal.

The prisoner had not long been lost to consciousness, when the rude stone, representing the martyrdom of St. William, slowly rolled aside, discovering a niche, through which Father Oswald entered the dungeon. Cautiously he approached the couch, and placed his hand upon the bosom of the expiring youth.

"As I suspected," he murmured. "Poisoned! poisoned! Fiend, I will defeat thee yet! He took from his bosom a flask, which contained some highly balsamic liquid, the exquisite perfume of which filled the prison, and applied it to the sleeper's lips, and as the contents slowly disappeared, breathed many a prayer, made many a holy sign, for Ulrick's safety. Its effects were gradual, but most satisfactory. The burning fever of the prisoner gradually yielded to a soft genial perspiration; his close-set teeth unclenched themselves, and he breathed freely.

"Saved!" exclaimed the priest, who had stood watching him with breathless anxiety; "two trials more, and thou art safe. In thine hour of need, boy, I will not fail thee."

Before he left the prison, the venerable priest emptied the rest of the poisoned wine, and refilled it from a basket which he had brought; and kneeling by the rude couch, offered up to Him who guards the fatherless a heartfelt prayer for Ulrick's safety.

* * * * *

The great bell of the cathedral tolled the midnight hour as the

body of the murdered earl, the second evening after his death, was borne by the officers of his household towards its final resting place, within the hallowed precincts. A party of men-at-arms, every fourth bearing a lighted torch, lined the centre aisle from the west entrance to the high altar, where the black-robed priests were ready to commence the Mass of the Dead. The choir of the magnificent church was hung with solemn draperies, and the highly emblazoned escutcheons of the deceased noble, whose military achievements had endeared him to his soldiers as much as his statesmanlike qualities, princely hospitality, and unblemished honour, had rendered him popular with his brother nobles. The richly carved stalls were filled by the monks; every dignitary of the order was in his place except the illustrious bishop, over whose episcopal throne a purple veil was thrown—typical of the widowhood of the church, from which many believed him violently removed.

As soon as the coffin was placed upon the dais in the centre of the choir, the low, solemn chanting of the priests began; and many a prayer was breathed by his brother knights, who, clad in steel, were standing round, for the repose of Hugh de Bigod's soul. Mirvan, as the representative of his house, was seated at the head of the bier—his brain almost stunned at the double blow it had received by the murder of his father and the supposed treachery of his friend. Matilda and Isabel watched and prayed in one of the dimly-lighted galleries above.

Herman, the murderer and the accuser, was there, as calm as though his life had been one of innocence, his hand free from blood. Once or twice he looked anxiously amongst the monks, to see if he could recognise the cowed visage of Father Oswald. It was a relief to his heart that he beheld it not. Doubtless he thought that Ernulf had succeeded in his sacrilegious attempt, and smiled at the triumph of his villainy.

Herbert de Lozenga and the old priest removed, the accusation of sorcery, the only danger which had given him any real uneasiness, fell to the ground, and he stood, as he thought, impenetrable in his crime. His approaching battle with Ulrick he looked forward to with pleasure rather than distrust as the consummation of his triumph; indeed, he could not doubt the result, for he had secretly contrived that a poison should be administered in his victim's food—poison of so subtle a nature, that while it spared the life of the receiver, it deprived him of all strength and energy, by the slow, undermining fever which it engendered, and which must have insured his success in the contest, but for the watchful energy of Father Oswald.

The conspiracy of the Saxon nobles, of which he was the life and energy, was undertaken under circumstances so peculiarly favourable, that its failure seemed impossible. William the Conqueror had withdrawn the flower of his army to France, to continue the war

which he had undertaken against its monarch, and during which he eventually terminated his career. The Normans who remained in England were in many instances divided amongst themselves. The death of Hugh de Bigod, the most energetic of their leaders, and William's marshal in England during his absence, still further augmented the Saxons' chances of success. The day of battle was the one fixed for the explosion ; and Herman, in the anticipated triumph of his views, tasted as much of happiness as guilt like his could know.

The solemn chant of the monks had ceased, and the priests at the altar were about to commence the Mass, when the prior, who presided in the absence of the bishop, arose in his stall, and, in a cold, stern voice, commanded Herman of the Burg to quit the church, adding, that the sacred mysteries could not be celebrated in the presence of a man accused of sorcery.

"Sorcery !" exclaimed Herman, red with passion,—“and where are my accusers ?—where the guilty prelate who, to shield his unworthy favourite, contrived the accusation ?—where the mad monk who witnessed to it ? A fearful death,” he added, “has removed the former—the judgment of Heaven has fallen on the false judge and the accuser.”

The prior was a man cold and passionless as the altar which he served ; yet even his quiet nature was indignant at the aspersion cast upon the memory of Herbert de Lozenga, whose supposed death he had many reasons for knowing had been contrived by his unblushing accuser. The impious blasphemy of attributing his own crimes to the judgment of Heaven shocked him, and increased the ill opinion he already entertained against the Saxon.

“Norman nobles !” replied the prior, “through you alone I answer the slanders of that bold, bad man. Whether the venerable bishop be living or dead, Herman is accused of sorcery. The accuser and the accused may die—the accusation, never. Either Herman of the Burg must quit the church, or I suspend the rites ; decide between ye.”

At the close of the speaker's voice, the officiating priests descended the steps of the altar, and began to remove the vestments peculiar to the service, and the monks stood up in their stalls, ready at the first signal to depart.

The frowns which he saw gathering on the brows of the Norman nobles told Herman that it would be dangerous to remain : he made a virtue, therefore, of necessity ; and, after bending his knee to the high altar, left the church with an air as much like that of indignant virtue as he could assume. Seeing that their enemy had fled, the priests recommenced the interrupted rites.

For a long time Herman paced the cloister, indulging in dreams of promised vengeance. Let but the insurrection triumph, and he would waste their church and convent both with fire and sword—

drive every Norman priest from out the realm. "Better," he exclaimed, "our father's ancient faith, than this enslaving, this aspiring priesthood!" The Norman nobles, whose haughty coldness stung his pride—they, too, must feel his wrath; in his mad thirst for vengeance, he contemplated taking even the lives of those with whom he lived on terms of intimacy and friendship—whose cup he often drained—whose pleasures he shared; contemplated it not with the regret of a man who offers a necessary sacrifice on the altar of freedom, but with the delight of a being whose instinct was of blood.

During his walk, his attention was attracted by the rays of a strong light which pierced through the crevices of the chapter-house doors. Finding them not to be locked, he entered, and saw preparations for a scene which gave him food for reflection. The richly ornamented building was evidently arranged, not merely for an assembly of the chapter, but the trial of a prisoner. The bishop's throne was hung with black, as if he were in person about to preside. Upon the table, in the centre of the room, upon a cushion, lay an enormous crucifix, and writing materials were placed at either side for the examiners. But what most attracted his attention were the various instruments of torture scattered on the floor—instruments, in that barbarous age, too often used to extort confession from innocence as well as guilt.

"Whose trial," he murmured, "can the monks be about to proceed with? Can Ernulf have failed in his design? Hath the fool been caught in his own snare? The confident tone of yon shaveling in the church has staggered me. The accuser and the accused," he added, slowly repeating the words of the prior to himself, "may die—the accusation, never."

"Never!" repeated a deep, solemn voice, so near to him that the word seemed to have been whispered in his very ear. He started and looked around, but saw no one—it was evident that he was alone. Although he attributed the sound to natural causes, it made an impression on him.

"This is childish!" he exclaimed; "I grow, indeed, infirm of heart, if a mere echo can unman it. No matter," he added, drawing a long breath to relieve himself as he spoke, "let but the next two days securely pass, and, Fortune, I defy thee!"

Still, however, the preparation for the midnight trial alarmed him, and as Herman was one who left nothing to chance, he advanced to the door by which he entered, intending to quit the chapter-house, and summon an esquire in whom he could confide, to conceal himself behind one of the colossal statues of the Four Evangelists placed in the arched recesses of the walls. To his confusion, however, the door was locked, whether by accident or design he could not tell, but conscience made him fear the former, and he was a prisoner. In vain he thundered at the massive doors; the sound

of his blows echoed through the cloisters, and gradually faded away, leaving him in fearful silence to commune with himself.

"It must be accident," he thought; "they would not dare to plot an outrage upon my person." This opinion was the more confirmed as he had not heard the slightest sound of a footstep near the door; indeed, it was not impossible that the wind had done it, for the portal fastened with a spring; and he resolved, since accident had made him a prisoner, to avail himself of his position to ascertain the tactics of his enemies. With this view he concealed himself behind the statue of St. John, patiently to await the commencement of the trial.

Meanwhile, a far different scene was passing in the church. As soon as the Mass was ended, Mirvan advanced to the bier and, after kneeling reverently to the dead, respectfully removed from it his father's sword, and pressed it to his lips. Every eye in the vast choir was upon him.

"Bear witness for me, my noble countrymen," he cried, "that I receive it unstained by injustice or by treason; and that he, who so late was of the first among you, has descended to the grave with honour as bright as his own shield."

"He has!" replied the Normans with one voice; so universal was their respect for the late earl's memory.

"Amen!" ejaculated the prior from his distant stall; "peace to Hugh de Bigod's soul."

"As the heir of his name," continued Mirvan, "I am the natural avenger of his blood; I am told the assassin claims the right of battle—is it so?"

"It is!" again answered the nobles.

"Then," resumed the speaker, "I claim the right to meet him. I might resign to another the judgment-seat, but not the danger of the listed field. I demand it," he added, laying his hand upon the coffin, "in the name of the dead, by my right of birth, by our brotherhood in knighthood, and the justice of my cause. Speak—is my claim allowed?"

A low murmur of satisfaction rose amongst the nobles, who had beheld, with secret dissatisfaction, Herman of the Burg, a man whom they despised, elevated to the position of Hugh de Bigod's avenger. It shocked their prejudice and pride that a Saxon lance should vindicate a Norman cause. The young earl's demand, therefore, was most favourably received; still they decided with that gravity of deliberation with which the nobles of the epoch treated all questions of chivalry, and after a lengthened consultation between themselves, Odo of Caen announced the decision of his brother peers.

"Your claim, brave earl, is allowed: here, in the presence of the noble dead, whom all so truly mourn—here, on our faith as true knights, we declare that Herman of the Burg may, without dishonour,

forego the fight on your claiming to be the champion in your house's cause. The seneschal," he added, "shall make known to the prisoner our decree, and God defend the right!"

"Amen," again responded the prior, in which this time all the ecclesiastics joined.

A faint scream was heard in the gallery above, and Matilda was seen borne insensible in the arms of her attendants from the church, followed by the grieving and compassionate Isabel. Mirvan beheld their departure with a deep-drawn sigh; for already he read the secret of his sister's heart, and loved her too well not to compassionate its weakness and its sorrows.

The holy water was sprinkled on the descending coffin, the priestly blessing given, and the herald's pompous duty done. As the remains of the once powerful earl, Hugh de Bigod, descended to their final resting place, one by one the priests and nobles slowly retired, leaving Mirvan alone within the church, praying by the side of the dead.

As the vassals of the different chiefs drew up under their respective leaders, and were preparing to return in procession to the castle, their departure was delayed by the arrival of George of Erpingham, the bishop's seneschal, who, at the head of a body of troops, entered the inclosed precincts of the cathedral, and placed a guard at the only gate by which egress was possible. Whatever were the good knight's intentions, resistance was in vain, the force he commanded being sufficient to crush the slightest attempts at opposition.

"What means this, George of Erpingham?" demanded Odo, who from his rank and influence was generally the interpreter of the sentiments of his peers. "Do we meet as enemies?"

"Heaven forbid!" replied the jovial knight. "I am here to do the Church's errand, not to break lance with such worthy sons as you. If the wolf hides itself amidst the flock, the flock must not murmur at being detained until the wolf be found."

As he spoke, an officer of the church approached and whispered something into his ear.

"Pardon me, gentle knights," he resumed; "but the wolf is found, and further precautions are unnecessary."

With a wave of his hand he motioned to the guard at the gate to fall back, and give egress to the nobles and their followers, who resumed their march, wondering what circumstance could have caused so unusual a proceeding.

As the elder nobles passed the gate, the same officer who had whispered to George of Erpingham placed in their hands a paper, on reading which they resigned the conduct of their men to their esquires, and retired, with thoughtful steps, into the cathedral. It was evident that some strange event either had occurred, or was about to take place, and the curiosity of those who were unsummoned was unbounded. But their patience was doomed to be exercised, as

well as that of our readers, while we return to the fair cousins who so lately quitted the church.

"Speak not of consolation," replied Matilda to the tender soothings of Isabel, as soon as they reached the castle, and were retired to the privacy of their own apartment; "grief succeeds to grief, and each fresh hour brings but fresh sorrow with it. I feel so assured of Ulrick's innocence, that I could pin my life upon his faith. But how to prove it? To-morrow he meets my brother in the listed field; and either I must mourn that brother lost, or weep the truest heart that crime and calumny e'er sacrificed at the base shrine of jealous, mean revenge."

"Don't weep, don't weep," sobbed the affectionate hearer, the tears at the same time coursing down her own pale cheeks; "Heaven and our Lady to our aid! We are not hopeless; the fight may be prevented yet. Had Herman been the champion, I would not have given one little sigh to have prevented the meeting in the lists. You are convinced, you say, of Ulrick's innocence?"

A reproachful glance at the doubt which the question seemed to imply was Matilda's only response.

"Be not angry, pretty coz," continued the fair girl; "remember I am not in love with him; and I know that when the heart pleads, the judgment is sometimes silent. Besides, this is not the moment for a shadow of coldness or unkindness to pass between us. Could we but see Ulrick, perhaps we might obtain some clue to this most fearful mystery; for, like you, I would fain believe him guiltless; though, unlike you, I sometimes mistrust my heart—it leads my head astray."

"Obtain but that, and fear not that he is saved!" exclaimed Matilda. "Trust me, Isabel," she added, blushing at the warmth she had betrayed, "'tis not the raving of a senseless love that speaks, but the conviction of my better reason. Men do not fall as the archangel fell; from purity to the extreme of sin a gradual change succeeds. Ulrick's mind was honour's self; a mirror so highly polished, that Truth might view her image. I have watched its every phase, and found each thought was pure. And he, the good, the gentle, murder an aged—a defenceless man! murder my father! Impossible! If an angel, trumpet-tongued, pronounced him guilty, Matilda never could believe it."

Could Ulrick, from the depth of his prison, have heard the maiden's eloquent defence, he would have deemed his sorrows overpaid. Firmly she met the searching look of Isabel, as every page of feeling was displayed to invite the reader's gaze. The warm-hearted girl threw her arms around her cousin, and exclaimed:

"I do believe thee! I read it in thy dark eyes' deep intelligence—those portals of thy soul—when thy pure spirit looks upon the world, and scorns its worthlessness. You love him, coz?" she added.

"Truth needs no subterfuge : I do," simply answered Matilda.

"Then he must be saved. Rouse thee, coz—we have a game to play will need our woman's wits. Odo of Caen, you know, is plighted to my sister Jane ; I have some interest with him ; we both must try him—use all the artillery of sighs and tears—the weapons with which mother Nature arms our sex when we contend 'gainst proud, imperious man. Doubt not but we will bend him to our will. Kneel," added Isabel, "and ask His blessing on our enterprise who reads our purpose, and who knows 'tis good."

The two fair and innocent creatures, like twin seraphs, bent the knee, and offered up a prayer as pure as ever fell from angel lips for suffering innocence. The act poured the balm of both courage and consolation into their souls. Silently enveloping themselves in their dark mourning mantles and veils, they left their chamber to seek the knight whose word alone could gain them admittance to Ulrick's presence.

* * * * *

Long and anxiously did Herman remain concealed behind the statue of the saint in the chapter-house of the cathedral ; at times, he thought of renewing his frantic efforts for freedom, but prudence, and the desire of witnessing proceedings in which in all probability he would find himself deeply interested, restrained him. At last, the distant steps of the approaching brethren fell upon his ear, and despite his long habitude in crime, and the confidence which success bestows, his heart beat wildly as they drew near.

"They come," he whispered to himself ; "courage, patience, and I triumph !"

From the position in which he was placed he could see all that passed, but ran little risk himself of being seen, as nothing could be more unlikely than that any one would take the trouble to mount the niche in which he was concealed.

First in the procession were two priests, bearing the abbatial and episcopal cross ; then the members of the chapter, two and two—the latter, as they entered, bowed to the crucifix, and took their seats in their respective stalls ; the prior followed, bearing his staff of office, and assumed his seat at the head of the table.

"I see no prisoner yet," thought Herman ; "perhaps, after all, it is but some brother of their order whom they have met to judge for breach of discipline. No matter ; I will see this mummary out."

His doubts, however, were soon ended by the entrance of several of the Norman nobles in deep conference with Herbert de Lozenga, who, in his episcopal robes, the mitre blazing on his brow, and the crosier in his hand, appeared living before him ; from that moment Herman felt that he was lost.

"Living !" he exclaimed, almost loud enough to be heard. "Have, then, the mouldering ashes of Stanfield given up their dead, or have the fiends, who so long have served, at last deserted me ?"

"Brothers and nobles," said the bishop, as soon as he was seated upon his chair of state, "believe me that no matter of slight interest has induced me to summon you to this our sacred chapter. Danger threatens not only to your lives, but to the Norman rule throughout the realm. A vast conspiracy is organised to root us from the land. Scarce two days and the Saxons rise upon us. The day of battle is the day appointed for the massacre of all our race. Prudence and firmness may avert the blow which want of unity must render fatal. This is no childish menace, no partial outbreak," he added; "but the organised effort of a people's strength."

There was a pause as the prelate ceased speaking; men looked upon each other as men look who have received strange news; and Herman, in the gall and bitterness of his heart, cursed the lips which uttered it. Odo of Caen was the first to speak among his fellow-nobles.

"Father, this is intelligence to stir the blood within us, and worth even the risk your sacred person ran. Deign to explain the proofs on which it rests; that, knowing whence the danger comes, we may prepare to meet it. Who is the leader of this enterprise?"

"Herman of the Burg," solemnly answered the bishop, at the same time striking the ground with his crosier.

"Curse him," muttered the concealed listener; "Ernulf has betrayed me."

At the signal which the bishop gave, the doors of the chapter-house again opened, and the guilty squire Ernulf was led into the assembly by a party of the bishop's guard. Father Oswald followed him. The prisoner's face was flushed, although his limbs seemed feeble; even the presence of the Norman nobles was a relief to him; he knew that they were the inmates of the castle—friends of his master's kinsman—and trusted they might befriend him. The hope, however, was but a brief one; his eye glanced from their stern visages, and fell upon the instruments of torture lying on the ground; a cold perspiration bedewed his frame, and the strong man trembled.

"Ernulf," began the bishop. Struck by the voice, the wretched man looked up, and recognised in his judge the being whom, four-and-twenty hours before, he had, as he imagined, consigned to inevitable death. Father Oswald's mysterious knowledge of his crimes, and, to him, miraculous means of subduing him, had excited the latent superstition in his nature; he looked upon Herbert as one arisen from the dead, and armed with supernatural terrors to confound him. "Well may'st thou tremble, guilty man, to find me living," resumed the prelate, who marked the effect his appearance had produced, and trusted that it would enable him to bend the stubborn nature of the criminal to confession, without having recourse to those means which the rude justice of the age not only tolerated, but approved: "hast thou not heard that it is written,

‘the triumph of the wicked shall be short’? Confess thy vile conspiracy, thy master’s treason, and enable me and these noble knights to unravel the dark clue of guilt, and mercy, perchance, may be extended to thy forfeited life.”

A dead silence followed the speaker’s words—all waited to see their effect upon the hardy criminal, who, on discovering that the bishop was really in flesh and life before him, recovered the usual audacity of his nature, and determined in the recesses of his iron mind to endure the extreme of torture rather than betray the scheme on which not only his hopes of aggrandisement, but ultimate safety, depended. He remained therefore sullenly silent.

“Saxon dog,” exclaimed Odo, “dost thou not answer to thy judges?”

“What should I answer, noble Odo?” replied Ernulf. “Will the word of a simple esquire weigh against the assertion of a mitred prelate? What should I know of conspiracies, which I believe exist but in the imagination of my accuser, to save his favourite’s life? He hath already charged my noble master with the crime of sorcery; finding that insufficient, he now adds the charge of treason to complete his ruin.”

The firm tone of the speaker shook the faith of several of his listeners, who were not disinclined to believe that Herbert would have recourse to any measures to assure Ulrick’s safety. Herman silently congratulated himself upon the dogged fidelity of his accomplice.

“Have you no other proof than mere assertion, my lord?” demanded Robert of Artois, whose influence Herbert de Lozenga had frequently opposed in the council, and consequently excited his hate. “If not, I, for one, would not hang a dog on such a charge.”

“Nor I,” exclaimed another, “provided it were Norman. But this is a Saxon cur, and we cannot refuse to put the question, should my lord bishop in his Christian charity demand it.”

The sneer with which this was uttered did not deter the prelate from his purpose. ’Tis true he had obtained other and ample information, but from a source he wished at present to conceal. Though mild and gentle in his character, he could assume the tone of stern reproof, and meet the boldest with a front as lofty, a speech as cutting, as their own.

“’Tis well, sir knight,” he answered, “you have a churchman to contend with; but remember, if I draw no sword, that thousands are ready to achieve my bidding. That if as a priest I pronounce no sentence by which man’s blood is shed, that many a belted earl and landed knight are bound by feudal tenure to pronounce it for me. Robert of Artois,” he added, “and you, noble peers, no more I sue for your support—I now command it. Apply the question to yon wretched man, unless by confession he avoids the ordeal.”

Slowly the nobles present proceeded to give the necessary directions, the Catholic church not permitting any member of its orders in any case to pronounce sentence of death, or to shed human blood. Even in the Inquisition this rule to the last was invariably observed. Its familiars were all laymen, and those who were condemned were given over to the secular power, by whom alone they could be sentenced.

As the executioners now approached the unhappy criminal, Father Oswald drew his cowl still further over his features. Devoutly did Herman, who, from his place of concealment, watched the proceedings, pray that his esquire might expire under the tortures to which he was about to be submitted. Dead men he knew could tell no tales, and willingly would he have cut the thread of life of a being, one of whose greatest crimes was perhaps fidelity to himself ; as it was, he awaited the result with nervous impatience.

Ernulf, having been stripped of his jerkin, was first placed by his tormentors upon a frame of iron, and bound by leather thongs ; by a peculiar mechanism, the machine was gradually distended till every joint cracked in its socket, and the strained sinews throbbed with agony ; still the culprit spoke not, but with scowling brow and firm-clenched teeth gazed, like a maimed wolf, on the circle round him. Suddenly, the bands were let go, the frame returned to its natural size, and the distended joints shot in their sockets ; then the first groan issued from Ernulf's breast. Father Oswald trembled, and slowly pronounced the word "Confess !"

"What should I confess ?" replied the hardened man ; "I know nothing, and can reveal nothing."

Again the tormentors approached their victim. Placing him upon his knees, they gathered up his long hair, and plaited into it the end of a cord which hung suspended from one of the beams. As soon as all was prepared, on a signal from Odo they elevated him so that he hung suspended by the hair of his head. For two minutes did he endure the fearful torture, his temples throbbing in agony, his eye-balls bursting from his head. Still he made no sign—uttered no word of confession. The prelate, unable longer to witness his sufferings, made sign they should release him.

By the laws of the question, three distinct species of torture were to be employed. If at the end of the third the prisoner's courage held out, he was deemed innocent, and consequently acquitted. As may be supposed, the last ordeal was the most fearful, and Herbert would willingly have spared it ; but Odo, who trusted that the squire's courage would hold out, or who believed that he had nothing to confess, opposed himself strongly to it.

"We are not children, my good lord," he said ; "our justice cannot be trifled with. If the prisoner pass the third question, I shall believe he hath been most foully wronged, and disbelieve this strange conspiracy ; so please you, let the executioners proceed."

"Be it so," replied Herbert, "since there is no other way; and be the crime on him whose obstinacy has left no other course."

Silently did Herman pray that Ernulf's courage might hold out, or nature yield beneath the effort. Again the fearful ministers of justice secured the wretched man, and inclosed his legs in a species of iron case compressible by screws. Ernulf groaned with agony. Still no word of confession passed his lips. The screws were about to be turned to their last extent, when Father Oswald, who stood before the prisoner, suddenly dashed back his cowl, fixed his eyes upon him, and at the same time drew back his long white hair, which hid a crimson scar upon his forehead.

"Parricide!" he exclaimed, "can nothing move thee? Confess, or perish in thy impious pride."

The sudden change which took place in Ernulf's features was terrific. The blood which forsook his cheeks rushed into his eyes, his jaw dropped, and he seemed stricken with a paralysis of horror.

"Spare me!" he exclaimed; "spare me, avenging spirit, and I will confess—all—all! Search in the lining of my breast-piece. The letters—pardon! Mercy! mercy!" exhausted with his sufferings, both of mind and body, he found temporary relief in insensibility.

"Bear him to prison," exclaimed the bishop, "and let his breast-piece be placed upon the table here before us."

The mangled wretch was instantly conveyed from the chapter-house, and the assembly relieved of the presence of the executioners.

As Herbert de Lozenga demanded, the breast-piece was placed upon the table and examined by the nobles present. Between the lining and the fold they found two papers; the first contained a detailed account of the plot, the names of the franklins and Saxon leaders most compromised, their places of meeting, and number of men-at-arms. As the bishop asserted, the day of battle was fixed for the outbreak, when, under pretence of witnessing the combat, they could assemble unsuspected. In the list of the Norman nobles whose lives were to be sacrificed, were the names of most present: the paper was in the hand-writing of Herman of the Burg, and attested by his seal.

"Traitor!" exclaimed Odo; "much as I despised him, I little expected this."

"Nor I," added Robert of Artois, whom a sense of their common danger for once rendered just.

"But what are we to do?" demanded the nobles with one voice.

"Leave that to me," replied the bishop. "Do you, as peers and knights, pronounce the traitor's doom; I'll find the means to see it executed. Think you," he added, with something like an expression of contempt, "that if, like yours, my hand might grasp the sword, that long ere this I had not reached him?"

Herman, secure, as he thought, in his concealment, smiled at the

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